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SUBJECT: GUATEMALA'S MARGINALIZED WORKERS: PROSTITUTES AND
CHILD TRASH-PICKERS

11. (U) Summary: Driven by economic hardship into prostitution, women loiter in the doorways of dozens of brothels lining the street in the seedy red-light district of Chimaltenango. Driven by the same economic forces, children, some as young as ten, toil alongside their parents in a municipal landfill not far from the capital, salvaging recyclable plastic from heaps of rubbish. On April 21, poloffs visited a red-light district and a nearby landfill to assess the incidence of child and forced labor. An NGO is seeking to provide alternatives to these impoverished and exploited workers. End Summary.

12. (U) On April 21, poloffs visited two brothels in Chimaltenango, 50 kilometers from the capital, and a landfill in nearby Alotenango for a closer look at Guatemala's marginalized informal labor sector. Poloffs were accompanied by the director and a social worker of "The God's Child Project" (GCP), a well-established NGO that seeks to rescue and assist victims of sexual and labor exploitation. Poloffs spoke with prostitutes and child scavengers about their work conditions and challenges.

NGO Assistance to Victims

13. (U) GCP opened its "Institute for Trafficked, Exploited and Missing Persons" (ITEMP) in 2001 to provide greater assistance to victims. According to Director of Operations Charles Moore, ITEMP initially focused on raising public awareness and did not formally begin to identify or rescue trafficked and exploited victims until January 2008. GCP currently employs six social workers who provide critical tips on suspected victims to ITEMP for follow-up investigation and rescue. (Note: ITEMP does not currently receive any USG funding for its programs but is seeking G/TIP funding. End note.)

14. (U) GCP provides shelter and services to the homeless. Its shelter in Antigua has a capacity of 150 and separate sections for single men and for families. It houses 100-125 homeless persons per day, with an average stay of six months. There is no maximum length of stay. The only restrictions on residents are prohibitions on weapons, drugs, and alcohol. According to Moore, the shelter is GCP's most important asset and its best source of information on victims.

Prostitution

15. (U) Chimaltenango's seedy red-light district is home to some 40 brothels that service local residents as well as traveling businessmen. With the constant rumble of overloaded trucks on the nearby Inter-American Highway, poloffs spoke with 26-year-old brothel manager "Max" and 21-year-old transvestite prostitute "Valeska." Max said he supervises 12 sex workers - nine women and three transvestites ranging in age from 20 to 50 -- in the only bar in the area featuring transvestites. Six prostitutes work the morning shift, while the other six work the night shift five days a week. During our visit, three were on duty.

16. (SBU) Valeska, a Guatemalan transvestite from Chimaltenango, has lived and worked in the brothel for four years. (Note: The legal minimum age for prostitution in Guatemala is 18. End note.) She said she has 15 clients, most of them regulars, and averages 3 to 4 clients per day, at the rate of Q50-75 (USD 6-9) for every 15 minutes. She said her clientele includes American citizens, but that most of her clients are Guatemalan professionals, 18 to 40 years of age, primarily from Guatemala City and Antigua. She is on Qof age, primarily from Guatemala City and Antigua. She is on duty from 8 a.m. to 9 or 10 p.m., earning Q100 to Q300 (USD 13-38) per day and extra money freelancing as a hairstylist. Out of her earnings, she pays Q30 (USD 4) per day for food and Q5 (75 cents) per client to the owner of the brothel.

17. (SBU) Valeska, who has six siblings, said she started working in the brothel to help support her parents, neither of whom is working. She gives her mother, whom she visits once a week, Q200-300 (USD 25-38) per week. Valeska acknowledged that she does not like what she does and would prefer to work with computers or as a full-time hairstylist if she could. She noted that she has a vocational degree in computer science, but experienced gender discrimination when seeking work in the capital, which she said was a common problem for transvestites.

18. (SBU) Max has been working at the brothel for eight months, as both a prostitute and a supervisor. He said he left his previous job at a restaurant because of the low salary. He currently earns Q50 (USD 6) per day, in addition to what he earns as a prostitute, for supervising the other prostitutes, booking the clients, managing the administrative and financial operations, and reporting to the brothel owner, a Guatemalan who lives in Antigua and owns several other brothels in the area. Although Max is also a nurse and a tour guide, his employment opportunities have been limited. Max claims he cannot get a regular job because of discrimination against gays.

19. (SBU) At another brothel, poloffs spoke with "Perla," a 22-year-old Salvadoran transvestite who has been working in the brothel for one year. Perla, a high school dropout, manages the brothel for the owner who pays her Q1,000 (USD 125) per month, and supervises eight employees, ranging in age from 15 to 38. Each employee services an average of five clients per day between 11 a.m. and 9 p.m. In addition to supervising, Perla herself handles an average of 18 clients a day, including some who pay only to converse and drink. She starts working when the first client arrives and works until 10:00 p.m., or sometimes as late as 3 or 4 a.m., depending on the traffic. Perla charges clients Q75 (USD 9) for every 15 minutes. Some days she earns nothing, while other days she earns as much as Q600 (USD 75). Each worker sets her own price. She said some girls earn more, some earn less, depending on the extent of their sexual knowledge and appearance.

110. (SBU) Although Perla has seniority, the trust of her boss, and more freedom of movement than the other workers who are fined Q100 (USD 13) if they roam in the street without her permission, she said she does not like her job. She claims she is free to leave but chose to return after being deported to El Salvador five months ago. She said that because she is a foreigner no one will give her work and she has to bribe the police to work in the brothel. She claimed she lost her passport two years ago in a robbery.

111. (SBU) Regarding violence and security, Perla said that there are no security guards at the brothel and that the sex workers have to fend for themselves. She alleged harassment by police and immigration officers who arrive every Friday or Saturday night around closing time to check for girls younger than 18, whom they take to a homeless shelter. (Note: A social worker accompanying poloffs contradicted this, asserting that in fact the police rape them. End note.) Perla claimed that the officers take some of the workers "for a ride" and steal their day's earnings. She noted that once every six months the police conduct a big raid with some 40 patrol cars, each with four officers.

Waste Recycling

112. (SBU) In Alotenango's municipal landfill, amid soot, explosive chemicals, and scorching heat from fires smoldering beneath mounds of decomposing garbage, four families, including seven children under the age of 14, sort through the trash for recyclable plastic, which they sell for Q .15 (2 cents) per pound. Amid the grime, six small children supervised by one girl, about 7 or 8 years old, play in a make-shift outdoor day care center. According to ITEMP Director Charles Moore, ITEMP paid for the children to go to QDirector Charles Moore, ITEMP paid for the children to go to school and even developed a micro-finance chicken-raising project as an alternative income source for the families, but the parents forced their children to return to work in the dump.

113. (U) According to "Salvador," a municipal employee supervising the landfill, which has been in operation for four years, private dump truck drivers arrive once a day, each paying Q150 (USD 19) per load to dump their trash. Twice a month, trucks come to pick up the recyclable refuse. He estimated that the workers, who are paid Q30 (USD 4) for every 100 pounds of the recyclable trash, earn an average of Q500 (USD 63) per month. (Note: This Q30 figure, which amounts to Q .3 (or 4 cents) per pound is double that indicated by the workers themselves. End note.)

114. (SBU) Poloffs spoke with 14-year-old Maria Elena, who was sorting through the trash without any protective gear alongside her 35-year-old mother. Maria Elena, the oldest of the eight children working at the landfill, finished second

grade but was forced to leave school to work in the landfill to help her mother. She has six siblings, including a 13-year-old sister who also works in the landfill. Her two

other sisters, ages 3 and 8, are too young to work, she said.

(Comment: Both Maria Elena and her mother looked at least ten years older than their chronological ages and had the gravelly voices of chain smokers, presumably from their daily prolonged exposure to harsh pollutants. End comment.)

15. (U) ITEMP offered free medical testing to the sex workers we met, and negotiated with the parents of the children who work in the landfill to sign an agreement to send their children back to school. These offers, however, are not always accepted. For example, in January 2009, Maria Elena's mother agreed to send her daughters to school in exchange for ITEMP paying her monthly rent (approx. USD 31). ITEMP also built her a chicken coop and provided shuttle service for her children to travel to school. However, the children quit school and returned to the landfill after just three days because their mother wanted the income from their scavenging.

Comment

16. (SBU) These prostitutes and child workers are among thousands in Guatemala who are forced by poverty to resort to demeaning and dangerous labor for marginal income. While their situation could ultimately improve with a growing economy, for now it remains intractable, with many poor exploitable workers ready to take their places. The GOG and civil society should take greater steps to try to break the vicious cycle of poverty and to ameliorate the harsh conditions under which they work. The Guatemalan state is chronically underfunded, and while the GOG's modest new social welfare programs show promise, they are not commensurate with the scale of the problem. While civil society may to some extent, be able to fill the gap between what needs to be done and what the GOG can do, it lacks resources. USG-funded programs, such as the recently completed DOL-funded "First I Learn" project, are seeking to raise public awareness and to provide alternatives to child labor through education.

McFarland